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## JOWETT'S RELIGIOUS TEACHING.

## A STUDY.

THE publication of the College Sermons of the late Professor Jowett, Master of Balliol College, Oxford<sup>1</sup>, has been looked for with varied feelings by a large number of his pupils and friends. Which sermons will be included? Will they read as they sounded? Will the editor alter any passage? Shall we get the same little touches of humour and satire which used to fascinate us?—are the sort of questions which will have passed through the minds of his more ardent admirers. The volume now issued does not contain more than half, or possibly only a third, of the collection which will ultimately appear. The editor's task was a difficult one, and he has discharged it well, so far as it has gone. Whether he was best advised in proceeding upon lines which ignore chronological order is a question for difference of opinion. In most cases such a plan might be unsatisfactory, but in this case it does not much matter. The dates given to each sermon in the present volume appear to be a little haphazard. We are not sure whether they indicate the time of the first, or the last, or the second delivery, though in many cases it is certain that they do not mean the dates of the MSS. The sermon on "Sympathy," No. IX, preached at Balliol in January, 1879, may be familiar to some of us who heard it in London at St. Lawrence Jewry during an Easter vacation about two years later. It is probable that this sermon was altered or partly re-written. The same may be said of other numbers.

<sup>1</sup> Edited by the Very Rev. the Hon. W. H. Fremantle, M.A., Dean of Ripon. London; John Murray, 1895.

The sermon on the building up of the College, which bears the date October, 1870, was repeated with the slightest variations when the new Hall was completed in October, 1876. The text was the same, "Except the Lord build the house," &c. I was present on the second occasion, but not on the first. It might, on the whole, have been convenient if the dates on the MSS. had appeared. But these matters are unimportant, perhaps scarcely worth mention; and it is just possible that the MSS. were not dated, and the editor is merely recording the dates which he has personally associated with each sermon.

Before proceeding to consider the question of the sermons themselves, I may be permitted to express the regret that this volume, by limiting itself to addresses spoken to Oxford students, omits entirely the Westminster Abbey sermons, which were annually delivered from 1866 until the year of his death, 1893. But we are led to hope that they will appear in the next volume. I say this because the sermons which are most remarkable are just those which are of equal application to all sorts and conditions—not exclusively to college students. The general reader might be mistaken if he imagined that Jowett was in the habit of minutely classifying the people he sought to instruct. There is another reason why the limit to sermons delivered in the College Chapel and the University Church may be regretted. The contents of the volume are appropriate for all kinds of men and women, and are not, as a casual observer of the title might suppose, only of interest to youthful students. The value of this publication lies in its possible effect upon multitudes who never saw Jowett. Putting aside the feelings which are awakened among his many generations of pupils at reading his spoken words which were precious to them, it is of interest to consider what may be the possible effect of his religious teaching upon generations who will come after him. This opens up the larger and less personal question, What was the view of religion in general, and

of Christianity in particular, which will be recognized hereafter as the peculiar teaching of Benjamin Jowett? And here it may be said that the volume before us, more than any of his published works, might be appealed to as containing the definite record of Jowett's religion.

Jowett was popularly regarded by those who only knew him through hearsay as a person of heretical views, entirely unorthodox, and scarcely to be regarded as one who had a legitimate place among the clergy of the English Church as by law established. In this volume are found his writings upon "The difficulties of faith and their solution" (No. II), "The prospects of Christianity" (No. V), "Grounds of hopefulness" (No. VI), "The slow but sure working of the Christian Spirit" (No. VII), "Going to Church" (No. XVI), "God's judgment of us and our own" (No. XVI), and "The life of Jesus Christ" (No. XVIII). These seven sermons might be examined with the view to ascertain as nearly as possible his views about Christianity. They are all constructive, in spite of the fact that in almost every page in each of them there is a criticism of the popular and orthodox notions. We naturally turn to the last named, "The life of Jesus Christ," if we want to know what Jowett really thought about Christ. I would venture to say, with great diffidence, that this particular sermon, from the point of view of definite religious teaching, is the most striking in the present collection.

This sermon, like the closing passage of his introduction to Plato's *Republic*, deals with the moral value of the ideal of goodness as represented in the image of Christ. This is distinctly different from the traditional Christian doctrine of God being incarnate in the person of Jesus. And yet it bears a resemblance. The resemblance, however, is figurative rather than theological. Somehow there has taken hold of the imagination of the Christian mind a conception of an ideal humanity corporealized in a certain personality or figure called Jesus Christ. Sometimes he is called the "son of God" and sometimes the "son of man."

In a sense the figure is treated as historical because it is founded upon narratives in the New Testament. But it is not quite clear whether the element of fiction does not enter into Jowett's account of it. He says: "The record of the Gospels is fragmentary—we cannot exactly reduce it to a precise order; it is only by an effort that we produce the customs and opinions of the Jewish world at the Christian era. Neither is it the precise words of Christ that we desire to recover so much as His spirit and character." Jowett proceeds to delineate the character of Christ. He presents a living picture of some one whom it is possible to conceive, and whom, he suggests, ordinary men of our own day might "follow humbly and at a distance." It might be affirmed that Jowett's picture of Christ as a person is more vivid than that which can be read in the Gospel narratives. What Jowett presents as the description of Christ is certainly something which, if not exactly historical, is clearly intelligible to the understanding of ordinary men. How far the picture is drawn from imagination or from Jowett's own conception of human goodness appears to me an open question. At any rate the moral efficacy of presenting such a picture and the difficulties of the task seem to be best defined in Jowett's own words at the end of his introduction to the *Republic*. Here is the passage referred to: "We see Him in a figure only, and of figures of speech we select but a few, and those the simplest, to be the expression of Him. We behold Him in a picture, but He is not there. We gather up the fragments of His discourses, but neither do they represent Him as He truly was. His dwelling is neither in heaven nor earth, but in the heart of man. This is that image which Plato saw dimly in the distance, which, when existing among men, he called, in the language of Homer, 'the likeness of God' (*Rep.* VI, 501 B), the likeness of a nature which in all ages men have felt to be greater and better than themselves, and which in endless forms, whether derived from Scripture

or from nature, from the witness of history or from the human heart, regarded as a person or not as a person, with or without parts or passions, existing in space or not in space, is and will always continue to be to mankind the Idea of Good." This statement is in perfect consistency with the sermon under consideration and of those others in which Christ is described. Two questions naturally suggest themselves: First, Is this presentation of the *Idea of Good* affected by the decision of the doubt whether it is based upon an historical personage, or is merely a fictional creation? Secondly, Without such an image at all in concrete form, is it not possible for the human mind to conceive the same *Idea of Good*? These are important questions, not so much on account of their theological significance, as because of the moral consequences attaching to the answers which we might give to them. The theological difference between the old Hebrew Theism and this later development of Christian teaching is far less important than the moral contrast, if contrast there be, between possessing a corporealized ideal of human goodness and not possessing one. If it be true that history has produced the actual personation of this *Ideal of Good* it is still difficult to form any exact conception of this personified ideal, and, as Jowett says: "We know also that the life of Christ is so far above us that we cannot ascend to it. We can only follow humbly and at a distance." He says, "Let us see how far any *shadow* or recollection of it may exist among ourselves" (the italics are mine). Then we are told that "If anywhere, we must look for it not in extraordinary deeds or sayings, but in the daily occasions of life." So the image is focussed more and more within the vision of ordinary human experience. Indeed, in an earlier page of this same sermon, Jowett frankly recognizes the practical difficulty of conceiving of Christ at all and therefore of imitating him. He finds it necessary to reduce the ideal of the life of Christ to that of persons whom we have known and of whom we may say, as of him, "he or she went about doing good." He

describes such persons in simple yet vigorous words, and then he says of them: "Divided as we are by so many centuries from the age in which Christ lived, I think that the contemplation of such lives is the best preparation which we can make for the study of the life of Christ Himself. *As they are, so was He in this world*" (my italics). One is here struck with the difference between Jowett's conception of Christ and that of the dominant creed. I cannot escape the reflection that the Christ here spoken of was entirely human, and that the strength of his power lay in his humanity. The image presented is not at all that of the miracle worker or of the Incarnate God. In Sermon V, on "The prospects of Christianity," he deprecates any notions of Christ coming again in the sense commonly expected by Christians. On this subject Jowett says (p. 61): "For when men have fancies about religion, which, however natural in the Primitive Church and in the age of the Apostles, ought to have been refuted long ago by universal experience, they are apt to loose their hold on the main principles of Christian truth. The visions in which they indulge have an absorbing effect on their minds; they lead them into nonsense; they withdraw them from their fellow-men. While they are looking into a vacant and distant heaven for a sign, the real signs of the times, which are everywhere around them, seem to escape them. For we see furthest into the future—and that is not far—when we most carefully consider the facts of the present.

"And therefore I shall not attempt to explain what is the meaning of Christ's coming again; 'whether in the body or out of the body we cannot tell.' Nor shall I ask the question which was put to Christ by the mother of Zebedee's children, whether His saints and apostles shall reign with Him, sitting upon thrones and judging the kingdoms of the earth. These are questions which can never have an answer; we might as well argue about poetry or figures of speech."

Thus it is clear that Jowett dismissed some of those views of Christianity which are expressed in all the creeds. In what respect does the ideal which he presents of Christ differ from that which any philosophical mind, not Christian, might form of human goodness? In other words, does it appear that the religious estimate which Jowett has set forth of the possibilities of human character is inconsistent with simple Theism? Again, is it necessary to hold in one's mental vision the image of an individual Christ in order to form the best conception of human righteousness? Can we not arrive at the same result if we think only of the infinite moral righteousness of the Unseen God, and of our affinity with him? I put these questions not so much with the view of giving any definite answers to them, as for the purpose of submitting that the highest thoughts of righteousness are not necessarily dependent upon the belief that God actually descended upon the earth in order to show men how to live. The conception of Christ, disentangled as it is in this volume from its popular miraculous associations, is only an ideal. In saying this I do not suggest any doubt as to the bare historical data which may be derived from the Gospels. Nor would there be any gain to Theism in attempting to disprove that such a person—and that particular person lived and taught in Judea eighteen centuries ago. But all figures in history from which we are separated by an enormous gulf of time must necessarily become for later ages ideals only. The greatest figures of the Old Testament and of ancient Greece are all ideals. Anything like precise information about their actual doings and sayings is out of the question. It is yet possible to form a fairly correct idea of their spirit and their character. These observations apply more particularly to moral teachers and philosophers than they do to warriors and statesmen.

The conception of perfect goodness does not fade away with the diminution of the belief that God once took upon himself human nature. That belief is undoubtedly passing



away from the minds of many educated men and women. The difficulties of believing it appear to be greater than formerly. Of all miraculous statements in the New Testament or in the Old, that one seems to conflict most of all with human reason. The story of it is surrounded by circumstances and conditions which are not compatible with known facts of human experience. It is not unnatural for any one to whom the doctrine is strange, and for many indeed who have been in the habit of accepting it without question, to ask themselves reverently, "For what purpose is this most difficult dogma taught? What special boon does it bring to the advancement of human goodness?" It cannot be said that when it was held in those countries which professed it with universal assent and with the utmost tenacity that human character displayed itself at its best. Neither can it be urged that those Christians who have ceased to believe it, but have not become atheists, are less moral or less religious than they were before. Writing as a Jew who has never believed it, there seems to be but one possible use to which such a teaching might contribute. It is just conceivable that to those who are convinced that God once dwelt upon earth in human form, it might appear that he has himself demonstrated to mankind how men should live. This is an obvious reflection, but it is marred by another: "He was like unto us in all things, sin only excepted." Now this does not mean that Jesus, being an ordinary man, went through life without committing sin, but that not being an ordinary man, that is being God, he was incapable of sin. The immaculate nature is so completely differentiated from humanity as to render imitation hopeless and impossible. Not so, however, if Christ was entirely human.

The value of Jowett's teaching about Christ is that it seems to suggest another view which is independent of the belief in the Incarnation. In everything which he tells us about Christ there is the human picture. The accounts he gives of him are natural and simple, generally compared

with something with which we are familiar. "He had come into the world to fulfil His Father's will, to deliver men from evil, to reunite them to God, to lay the foundations of a new and spiritual kingdom" (p. 63). And again, "We know that the founder of a religion is not like the teachers of it in after ages; he is not bound by convention and tradition, and he has a high and different standard" (p. 68).

The conception of the highest moral life does not rest upon a single instance of it, whether to be found in history or in fiction. The dignity of human nature, the doctrine of the likeness of God in human character, dispense with the necessity of imitation or even example. Examples of human virtue are precious when we meet with them, but no perfectly formed character is really moulded in all its details upon any other. Influence, that subtle force in human relations, is not the same as the resemblance in the realm of matter which is effected by patterns. No two human beings are precisely alike. It is impossible to give any accurate account of the exact causes which have produced a well-developed human character. And even where imitation is possible it can only be possible in part. The mainspring of goodness and nobility will be found to rest not so much in our imitative tendencies as in the inherent moral capacity of the individual. It would be nothing to have before us the finest models or samples of human excellence if there were not in the individual nature the aptitude for righteousness, the conception of perfect goodness. The God-idea and not the recollection of any person is the invariable source of the higher aspirations. Even in the case which is presented to us of an imaged goodness in the person of Christ we see there that the motive power was Christ's genius for the God-idea and not the imitation of some one else. A Christian who mentally assents to the doctrine of the Incarnation as another expression for this image of human goodness, as of an idol always before him, does not rise above the average

merely by the example thus presented to him. The recollection of a great person does not make him great if the element of greatness is not within him. So too without having heard of Christ, without the conception of any corporealized goodness, we find in Socrates the highest virtues.

Illustrations of moral excellence are difficult to adduce for the very reason that they are more often to be found in obscurity than within the gaze of men. The value of examples in righteousness, great as it is, is apt to be exaggerated. And, after all, it is rather the words of Christ than his actual life which have helped those who have sought to imitate him. The great Master of Balliol is himself an instance of the individuality of moral excellence. I do not believe that his peculiar devotion to truth, and his special love for God and for his fellow-men, and his great unselfishness, were entirely or mainly due to the image of Christ or of Socrates, though they were so constantly before him.

Without the doctrine of the Incarnation, it is possible to conceive of Jesus as an illustrious example of human goodness, and to understand that the memory of him, as of other great persons, is capable of exerting a powerful influence upon the characters of men and women in different ages. But much more than this seems to be demanded by some Unitarians and others who do not profess the Christian dogma. They would have us think that his example, and his alone, is the actual motive power in the formation of the best spiritual human characters. It is not merely an influence they would claim, but a revelation, and perhaps the only revelation to the human heart of true righteousness. Such a revelation as this, by which I suppose is meant a kind of intimation to the human understanding of what righteousness really is, comes, I believe, from another and, in a sense, a far more mysterious source. The acquisition of the knowledge of righteousness, and of our aptitude for assimilating it, is something which involves a revelation

of the divine nature itself. It is a direct message from the Uncreated, the Unseen, the Incorporeal, to individual human souls one by one. This it is which may be fitly called the Image of the living God in which we are created and have our being. I know that I am only suggesting one dogma instead of another; but it seems to me to represent a higher plane of spiritual philosophy than the Christian dogma of the Incarnation. Here there is not the imitation of anything, but the building up of something upon its own foundation.

In the foregoing observations I have not sought to fix the limit or the nature of Jowett's views of Christianity. I have merely suggested some considerations which seem to arise out of his sermons. There are doubtless many other problems which could be discussed in studying his writings contained in this single volume. Whatever may be thought or said about Jowett's opinions on Christian theology, this volume suffices, if other records were wanting, to reveal a mind and soul which may be described as illumined by the divine spirit. Over and above the intellectuality which distinguished all his utterances and all his writings, there is a breadth of view which is not merely intellectual. No one can account for the higher characteristics of Jowett's incomparable personal influence without taking note of his genius for the spirit of religion. Some persons, who fancy, inaccurately I think, that Jowett's teaching was the cause which had precipitated them into a sea of scepticism out of which they felt themselves unable to emerge, wonder that he too was not an agnostic. They marvel, perhaps, that he was able to criticize popular beliefs and yet retain his faith in God and immortality. It is not a sufficient explanation to say that he was endowed with an exceptionally clear mental vision that made it easier for him than for most men to separate the real from the unreal elements of religious thought. The true explanation appears to lie deeper, for Jowett's strongest religious emotions seem to have had their root in his

character rather than in any process of reasoning. When he spoke of God, of death, of righteousness, and of immortality, it was not so much the logician we seemed to recognize as the one who was mysteriously endowed with the love of truth. He was always most simple when he was speaking or writing of the highest spiritual problems. He seems to have thought that there is an intuitive sense both of God and of goodness in very simple and humble lives. Speaking of such persons in one of these pages (317), he says: "Sometimes they have seen with superhuman clearness one or two truths of which the world was especially in need. They may have been scarcely known, or not known until after their death; they may have had their trials too—failing health, declining years, the ingratitude of men—but they have endured as seeing Him who is invisible." He speaks, a few sentences above, of such persons in these words: "They too have a hidden strength which is derived from communion with the Unseen; they pass their lives in the service of God. . . . Their way of life has been simple; they have not had time to accumulate stores of learning."

It is impossible to resist the conviction that Jowett regarded religion in its fuller and most enduring sense as a gift to human nature—something which the wisest and the simplest alike could find within their reach. Often he has stated that he believed it to be independent either of the belief in miracles or of the results of Biblical criticism. It was above the Bible, though revealed in it; beyond the field of scepticism, though accidentally concerned with it. It had a relation to all the circumstances of life, and yet it was in a manner independent of them.

Morality and religion were so combined in Jowett's teaching that it is impossible in his view to separate them. He distinguishes between theology and morality, but always connects morality and religion. Abstract speculation in the sphere of religion did not attract him; it was unpractical, he would have thought.

Another great principle of religious life with which Jowett was possessed was that of the union of those whose lives were dominated by true religion, of whatever creed or party. Speaking on this subject he says (p. 311): "Religious life will no longer be liable to be upset by small earthquakes, but will have a wider and deeper foundation. Good men of all parties will more and more see that so far as they had the spirit of God at all, they meant the same thing far more than they supposed. They will see that other religions and other teachers of religion had in them also the spirit of Christ; and that these anticipations of the truth, instead of impairing the force of Christianity, strengthen and extend it; as Christ also Himself seems to intimate when He says, 'Many shall come from the East and from the West;' or again, 'And other sheep I have which are not of this fold.' They will recognize that what has been sometimes regarded as the triumph of Antichrist is only the natural consequence of criticism and science, which, like the rising of the tide, can by no human efforts be driven back."

The revelation of religion was represented by Jowett as a direct communication to the individual conscience—not perhaps in any miraculous sense, but rather as a sort of intuition like the gifts of reason and perception. So far from being absorbed with the sense of the difficulties of religion, Jowett was most keenly sensible of the simplicity of it. "The truth for which we are seeking is not a labyrinth without a clue, nor yet a mist in which we cannot see where we are going, but plain as the sun at mid-day, having the body of heaven in its clearness. It is not a mystery but a truism which we are apt to forget and to deem commonplace, and because it is so little realized in our lives. It is the light which lighteth every man, which shines daily and hourly, and accompanies us in all our ways and is therefore scarcely remarked by us. And we see the same light under many aspects, as it mingles with the shadows and clouds of earth, or is

obscured by them ; or as it shines in its own unclouded beauty, far away from us in the blue sky" (p. 314).

It would be beyond the scope of this essay to attempt to survey in detail all the religious teachings of the great Master of Balliol ; nor is it easy to circumscribe them. He himself has epitomized in various passages of his writings what it was he desired to teach in the sphere of religion and ethics. His views on these matters are spread among many volumes. They are to be found largely, and scattered over many pages, in his introductions to and commentaries upon Plato. Some of his most enduring essays remain in the two volumes which contain his critical notes and dissertations upon the Epistles of St. Paul. His sermons in the College Chapel and elsewhere (chiefly at Westminster Abbey) will naturally be regarded as embodying the most direct exposition of his religious views. Much more also remains to be learnt when his biography shall have been written. The life of Jowett was inseparable from his teaching, both in the religious and in the purely intellectual aspects of it. These two aspects appeared almost to merge into one. There was always traceable the ideal of human goodness and therefore of religion in his ordinary life, his personal transactions, his social intercourse. His views of life, and of politics, and of men and things, were penetrated with a spirit that was a religious one, just in like manner as his religious views and the expression of them were characterized by his strong intellectuality. I have often thought that if Jowett had devoted himself to the profession of the law, he must have become one of the greatest judges who ever lived. His mind was peculiarly a judicial one. Of all men he appeared to be most free from the taint of prejudice or bias, and he had an extraordinary insight into human nature and consequently a real knowledge of the world. These traits are discernible in his sermons as they were in his conversation. His sermons were as much the expression of his personality as were all the incidents of his

life. In other words, he was in the pulpit as unconventional and as much himself as he was in his study or in the lecture-room. Never was there a life more harmonious, more consistent, despite the fact that he was occasionally misunderstood and even misinterpreted.

OSWALD JOHN SIMON.